

## OBJECTIVITY AND OPPORTUNISM: THE SOCIAL POWER OF MENTAL MEASUREMENT IN ANGLOPHONE WEST AFRICA

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The 1994 publication of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* unleashed a storm of controversy.<sup>1</sup> The authors argued that low intelligence — more than poverty, racism or any other environmental factor — was responsible for persistent inequality in American life. The response was a flurry of activity on the part of academics and the popular press.<sup>2</sup> Defenders and detractors squared off, one side arguing that Herrnstein and Murray were writing flawed and even “racist” social science, the other countering that “political correctness” was blinding Americans to “scientific reality.”

From reviewing a substantial portion of the literature, three things are striking to this writer: first, that the debate about race and intelligence in the United States<sup>3</sup> is cyclical and will probably be seen again in a somewhat modified form; second, despite the strong response to *The Bell Curve*, it is not clear what impact, if any, this book made on public or educational policy in the United States; third, when placing the debate in a West African context, some of the arguments advanced by both sides become irrelevant. The fact is that despite sustained criticism, the use of different types of examinations (including intelligence tests, aptitude tests, external examinations and other standardized measures of cognitive ability) remain in use because they have been accepted as one of the best and most objective methods

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> This has been conveniently organized into two publications. See Steven Fraser, ed., *The Bell Curve Wars: Race, Intelligence, and the Future of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) and Russell Jacoby and Naomi Glauberman, eds., *The Bell Curve Debate: History, Documents, Opinions* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to stress that *The Bell Curve* is about race and intelligence because the authors attempted to downplay the role of race, focusing instead on a “cognitive elite.” Herrnstein has insisted since the 1970s however, that his interest is not in race but in class. An early articulation of ideas later developed in *The Bell Curve* can be found in Richard J. Herrnstein, *IQ in the Meritocracy* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1971).

of comparing individual abilities.<sup>4</sup> The history of intelligence testing suggests, however, that uncritical acceptance of examinations is problematic. For example, there has been a consistent debate as to whether educational tests are truly "objective." While they do serve a social function, their implementation has also come about as a result of social and political agendas. At the same time, when one views the debates about examinations in an African context, one finds that African educators have had legitimate reasons for adopting the very measures which opponents are attempting to eliminate in other countries.

This paper studies the development of examinations in West Africa and Britain, and intelligence testing in the United States. I argue that, with the creation of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) the British West African colonies attempted to enter into the test development arena on their own terms, using British derived standards and the implied objectivity of examinations to their own advantage. This was done with the assistance of educators and policy makers from the United States and Britain. In both of these countries, the development of standardized forms of the measurement of human mental abilities occurred within particular social contexts. When these examinations were utilized in Anglophone West Africa, their reception was different. While standardized examinations along the British model were accepted as a method of evaluating students, "intelligence" as a concept never gained the prominence among West African researchers and students that it received in America and Britain.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See JoAnne Brown for what she calls an "ethical statement" regarding intelligence tests. Brown believes that intelligence tests are not better measures of an individual's ability than other less convenient or less popular methods. See JoAnne Brown *The Definition of a Profession: The Authority of Metaphor in the History of Intelligence Testing, 1890-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Intelligence tests were not widely used as part of official educational policy in Anglophone West Africa. However, there were attempts to develop intelligence tests specifically for West African students. See A. Taylor and G.D. Bradshaw "Secondary School Selection: The Development of an Intelligence Test for Use in Nigeria," *The West African Journal of Education*, 9.1 (February 1965), pp. 6-12. The examinations developed by the Cambridge University Examining Syndicate and the University of London maintained their hold until 1964 when the Council voted to create its own

### Intelligence in the United States

The widespread present day use of mental tests (intelligence, aptitude, etc.) makes it seem as though they have been in existence for centuries. Stephen Jay Gould in *The Mismeasure of Man* argues instead that the idea of "intelligence" as a concept became reified early in the twentieth century. By "reified" Gould means that an abstract concept was "made real" and invested with social and intellectual power. He writes, "[w]e recognize the importance of mentality in our lives and wish to characterize it, in part so that we can make the divisions and distinctions among people that our cultural and political systems dictate. We therefore give the word 'intelligence' to this wondrously complex and multifaceted set of human capabilities."<sup>6</sup> Gould then highlights a long history of efforts to quantify differences in human mental abilities, explaining how efforts to measure brain size and capacity (phrenology and craniometry) in the nineteenth century gave way to sophisticated efforts to measure mental ability in the twentieth century. The intelligence quotient was one of these new measures.

The research which pioneered the creation of intelligence tests was conducted in France, by psychologist Alfred Binet. Binet viewed intelligence tests primarily as a means of identifying children in French schools with special educational needs. His tests created a scale with which to determine a child's mental age in relation to his or her chronological age. German researcher Wilhelm Stern and American psychologist Lewis Terman created the intelligence quotient when Stern suggested that intelligence be expressed as a ratio of chronological age to mental age and Terman suggested that number be multiplied by one hundred.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, psychology was an emerging field in the United States and Great Britain. In the early half of the twentieth century, the intelligence quotient was a major

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Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations. See The West African Examinations Council, *Annual Report for the Year Ended 31 March 1969* (Accra: WAEC, 1969), pp. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Fancher, *The Intelligence Men: Makers of the IQ Controversy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), pp. 69-83 on Binet, and 103.

preoccupation of a section of American psychologists. Early pioneers struggled to develop a profession which would scientifically study the mind. As a young discipline, psychology in the United States had to differentiate its work from that of other disciplines concerned with human nature, especially biology and philosophy.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, academic psychologists in Britain found themselves marginalized within university departments of physiology and philosophy.<sup>9</sup> The need to demonstrate the scientific basis of the field became important and intelligence tests provided a means for such a demonstration.

The outbreak of World War I offered an opportunity to demonstrate the efficacy of intelligence tests in being used for administrative purposes. This was accomplished through the United States Army tests which helped officers to sort army recruits. Lewis Terman was instrumental in this project and following the war, revised the army tests for use in schools.

Terman's work precipitated the first publicized debates about the importance of heredity vs. environment in an individual's success. In 1922 columnist Walter Lippman wrote a series of six critical essays in *The New Republic* against the rising importance of intelligence tests. Lippman argued that intelligence tests did not truly measure "intelligence" since even the testers could not agree on the meaning of the term. He challenged the notion that intelligence was hereditary. While he agreed that the tests could be useful in schools, he criticized the overzealous claims being made by testers and was particularly concerned about the misuse of tests in schools. According to Paul Davis Chapman, what he feared was that "The testers would become gatekeepers at the door of opportunity."<sup>10</sup> Terman responded with a scathing attack on Lippman's reading of the Army data and his general understanding of statistical principles. Chapman argues that Terman's

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<sup>8</sup> Jill G. Morawski and Gail A. Hornstein, "Quandary of the Quacks: The Struggle for Expert Knowledge in American Psychology, 1890-1940" in JoAnne Brown and David K. van Kueren, eds., *The Estate of Social Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 106.

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind: Educational Psychology in England c.1860-c.1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 57-58.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Davis Chapman, *Schools as Sorters: Lewis M. Terman, Applied Psychology, and the Intelligence Testing Movement, 1890-1930* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), pp. 134-135.

response demonstrates that he saw himself as a crusader against all criticisms of intelligence tests which were beginning to be directed towards him. Although this was the first major public debate in America which challenged the assertions of the psychologists in relations to IQ, subsequent exchanges have been equally acrimonious.<sup>11</sup>

With all of this criticism about intelligence tests, how did they manage to become so popular among educators and employers? The answer to this question lies in understanding the context of the times in which intelligence tests developed. The period from 1890 to 1930 has been characterized as the Progressive Era in America. One of the goals of Progressive reformers was to use science as a means of improving society. This was evidenced by reforms in politics, public health, and education. In relation to education, some type of compulsory education had been enacted in state laws since the 1850s. After 1900 however, reformers pushed for more enforcement of these laws requiring that children attend school up until at least the age of fourteen. Teachers faced an unprecedented increase in the numbers and diversity of their students and struggled particularly, to find ways of dealing with mentally deficient children. Intelligence tests began to be used to sort students into different ability groupings.

Figures for the numbers of tests in use are illustrative of the demand. For example, in 1919 the Army Tests were transformed into the National Intelligence Tests and were made available for schoolchildren. Within a year, over 400,000 copies of the tests had been sold. According to Paul Davis Chapman, by 1925 psychologists had developed over seventy five tests of general mental ability and by mid-decade yearly intelligence test sales approached four million.<sup>12</sup> This occurrence was common and was true of both examinations and

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<sup>11</sup> Another major series of debates occurred in the 1970s after the publication of Arthur Jensen's "How Much Can we Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?" *Harvard Educational Review* 39.1 (Winter 1969): pp. 1-123. Jensen's pessimism was seen as an attack on the newly created 'Head Start' program. See also, Jensen's *Bias in Mental Testing* (New York: The Free Press, 1980). For critiques of Jensen, see Leon J. Kamin, *The Science and Politics of IQ* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 1974), James M. Lawler, *IQ, Heritability and Racism* (New York: International Publishers, 1978) and Carl Senna, *The Fallacy of IQ* (New York: The Third Press, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Chapman, *Schools as Sorters*, p. 1.

intelligence tests. Despite initial opposition, their uses quickly spread. The rapid expansion in the use of IQ tests suggests that schools found them to be an extremely useful tool.

Despite their widespread acceptance, Kurt Danziger has described how intelligence tests served to undermine the status of teachers. Danziger suggests that education became "psychology's primary market" and argues that:

After the turn of the century psychologists' relations with teachers became increasingly overshadowed by a new professional alliance which was consummated through the medium of a new set of investigative practices. The group of educators with whom psychologists now began to establish an important and mutually beneficial alliance consisted of a new generation of professional educational administrators. This group increasingly took control of a process of educational rationalization that adapted education to the changed social order of corporate industrialism.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to the widespread use of IQ tests, a teacher's judgment was more highly valued in assessing a student's ability. IQ helped to usurp the authority of teachers in favor of this new class of administrators.

It should be noted that there is a difference between intelligence tests and other types of examinations (i.e. civil service examinations in Britain). However, there were periods, particularly in relation to examinations for British students that the distinctions between these types of measure were blurred. This was particularly true in early twentieth century England, with the development of the eleven-plus examination.

#### The Competitive Principle in England

Educational tests in the Great Britain were modeled on the civil service examinations which became prominent in England in the late 1850s. In this respect, England preceded the United States in the

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<sup>13</sup> Kurt Danziger, *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 103.

creation of civil service examinations but followed the lead of American psychologists in expanding the uses of intelligence tests.<sup>14</sup> These first examinations were developed during a period of social and administrative reform. According to John Roach, the Victorian preoccupation with "open competition" led to the creation of examinations during this period. This "open competition" ideal, while initially influencing economic practices, spilled over into other parts of public life, eventually effecting both education and public administration. Roach refers to this as a "triumph of free competition" which took place between 1850 and 1870. He writes, "By 1850 the belief in 'competition as against restriction or private favor' was in the air, for it fitted the ethos of the age."<sup>15</sup> It is ironic to note, since open competition was believed to be "fair," that examinations were used to further British imperial goals in India. In 1853, competitive examinations were introduced into the Indian Civil Service, sparking debates about educational reform. Prior to the rise of open competition, it was believed that an individual's character was what made them suitable for government service. The examination turned the impetus more towards academic performance.<sup>16</sup> It came to be believed that there was no better way of adequately determining proficiency or qualifications than examinations.

Examinations initially served three functions: to set and maintain academic standards, to choose candidates for public office or

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<sup>14</sup> Civil service examinations in the United States began following the 1883 establishment of the Civil Service Commission. The purpose of the commission was to administer examinations and select government appointees on the basis of merit. See Paul Davis Chapman, *Schools as Sorters: Lewis Terman, Applied Psychology, and the Intelligence Testing Movement, 1890-1930* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> John Roach, *Public Examinations in England 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 16-17, 22.

<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on the importance of character as opposed to demonstrated academic ability persisted in West Africa long after 1853 and was discussed by British and African commentators. Two examples are Brigadier-General Sir Gordon Guggisberg, *The Keystone: Education is the Keystone of Progress: Mix the Materials Badly, Omit the Most Important and the Arch Will Collapse; Omit Character-Training from Education and Progress Will Stop* (London: Waterlow and Sons Ltd., 1924) and Otonti Nduka, *Western Education and the Nigerian Cultural Background* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1964).

an independent profession (i.e. medicine, law) and social engineering. The first of these objectives is one of the main reasons that examinations were adopted for schools. Prior to the creation of examinations, secondary schools in particular were the subject of much criticism. The standards set by external examinations forced schools to aspire to prepare their students within certain guidelines. While the debate continued regarding whether examinations were the best tool, the fact that candidate performance had the effect of introducing further educational changes suggests that they were taken seriously. This was in fact, one of the purposes of examinations. The poor performance of Scottish students on the first Indian Civil Service examinations, for example, motivated educational reforms in that country. It was believed in the mid-fifties in England that examinations could help to improve the standard of both primary and secondary education by setting an external standard for students to attempt to reach.

The goal of choosing candidates for public office has already been discussed but it is worth emphasizing that, in a reformed England, examinations became viewed as the best method of selecting candidates for Civil Service jobs. Those tests which evaluated professional candidates were somewhat different from academic examinations because they served a primarily vocational role. According to Roach, "they look[ed] to some model of professional efficiency rather than to an ideal of general culture or of intellectual attainment."<sup>17</sup>

The goal of social engineering was important to the Civil Service reformers but has been little mentioned in recent years when examinations have been criticized. Success in an examination could potentially provide an opportunity to a student whose abilities would have been ignored in a less objective setting. It was argued that open competition would be merit-based, offering talented boys and girls from a lower socio-economic strata a previously rare chance to receive higher education. This became an important motivation for students in West Africa as education became viewed as the passport to prosperity and more members of the African elite were drawn from the ranks of the Civil Service. At the same time, the West African case provides clear examples of how examinations were developed and expanded to

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

serve the functioning of the British colonial government, as opposed to the needs of West African students.

Turn of the century Britain was also influenced by the rise of mental testing which, according to Gillian Sutherland, was initially used in evaluating mentally deficient children (along lines similar to those suggested by Alfred Binet). In contrast to the European continent, compulsory education came late to England in 1870. Like the United States however, teachers were overwhelmed with the needs of students of varying abilities. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, educational psychologists were able to successfully advance mental testing in schools as their primary market.

The appointment of Sir Cyril Burt (1883-1971), a psychologist and specialist in mental testing as head psychologist of the London County Board of Education is usually taken as a sign of the ascendance of the status of educational psychologists in school administration in Britain.<sup>18</sup> As the official psychologist of the London County Council, Burt was responsible for the administration and interpretation of mental tests in London's schools. In this capacity, he was able to translate his ideas into public policy. In 1932, he became a professor at University College, London, the most influential chair of psychology in Britain.

Burt was a major contributor to the research on the heritability of intelligence. He tested the intelligence of identical twins who had been separated at birth and found a close correlation between the abilities of fifty-three twin pairs. He argued, using this research, that genetics had to play the primary role in the development of intelligence.

While primary education was free and compulsory in early twentieth century Britain, secondary education was not. Examinations

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<sup>18</sup> The history of mental measurement has been subject to more revisionist approaches in Britain than in the United States. For example, it was previously assumed that British examinations were greatly influenced by mental measurement because it enjoyed popular support and was influential among social scientists at the time. However, Gillian Sutherland has conducted the most extensive review of the policy documentation thus far and argues that the extent to which intelligence tests were used in schools cannot be generalized to all of England. There was a great variation by county in the types of intelligence tests that were incorporated into the examinations and some, by today's definition, could not be accurately be described as tests of "intelligence". Gillian Sutherland, *Ability, Merit and Measurement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 188-189.

were used as part of the competition for scholarships. Offering free places to academically successful students fulfilled the social engineering goal of providing educational opportunities to academically talented students from diverse class backgrounds. This in turn challenged at least part of the class bias of the allocation of education in Britain.

Intelligence testing in Britain became most controversial with the creation of the eleven-plus examination. The eleven-plus examination utilized intelligence tests and were said to be able to evaluate a student's aptitude. Eleven-plus became the age at which students would be permitted to leave school. Students who wished to continue needed to do well on the examination. According to Robert Montgomery,

The 11+ examination was heavily criticized because of the way it dominated the curriculum of the primary schools, determining much of what was taught. There was little such controversy about the curriculum in the earliest days of public examining: competition was what counted. . . . The subject matter was perhaps less important than the competition.<sup>19</sup>

More importantly, Sutherland points out that "The 11+ examination became the pivot between primary and post-primary education and a strong performance in it might alter, even determine the course of a child's life."<sup>20</sup> In 1951, this examination was replaced.

#### The History of Education in West Africa

Educational developments in West Africa followed a different trajectory from Britain and the United States. Prior to the imposition of colonial rule, there had been indigenous education systems in different West African societies. There was also a strong Islamic presence in West Africa and Muslim children attended Koranic

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Montgomery, *A New Examination of Examinations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Sutherland, *Ability, Merit and Measurement*, p. 187.

Assuming that two groups stand to benefit, one wonders what is left for the majority of Tanzanians' sons and daughters whose educational goal is to serve their parents who live and work in rural areas. Strictly speaking why would an agricultural officer in a remote rural area (where 90% of Tanzanians live) use English to educate a farmer? We would think that the amount of English required is at the level where individuals could read instructions in the use of fertilizer and not the English required to argue with technocrats of the World Bank in Washington.

By all standards the current language policy needs to change. No one knows when the change will take place, but we know for sure that if anything, the continuation of English as a language of education benefits only a small percentage of Tanzanians. The largest concern is the fact that it is detrimental to the nation at large today and for many years to come. Barrett (1994:14) has this painful truth to remind us: "Within the present system, many students spend four years in secondary school learning *not to think*, but copying down notes from the board which they don't understand" (emphasis mine).

In the foregoing, we have attempted to show the weaknesses of the current language policy in education. We claim that the continued use of English in secondary schools is wrong because students are not learning at all. We, therefore, propose a three-tier language planning model which stipulates as follows:

- (a) that Swahili be used as a medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary level institutions,
- (b) that English continue to be taught in all classes after standard three and be taught by competent teachers. It should continue to be a compulsory subject up to and including form six,
- (c) that ECLs be used or be taught in the first four years of schooling. Let this be an option entirely decided upon by the community concerned.

In this model, ECLs would be used specifically for traditional activities and at the lower levels of education. Swahili would be used as a national language and as the language of learning. English would be

more important than intelligence (which as previously noted, was invented in the twentieth century).<sup>24</sup>

Jacob Ajayi in *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891 the Making of a New Elite* highlights the fact that in early evangelization efforts, the missionaries relied heavily on the work of Africans, particularly Sierra Leonians, in carrying out their proselytizing work. The use of Africans as missionaries was crucial because, until the late nineteenth century, West Africa had been known as "the white man's grave."

Although Africans had made the first missionary inroads in the early nineteenth century in West Africa, as the close of the century emerged, British attitudes towards the abilities of Africans were being influenced by an increasingly imperialistic impulse in Africa. A younger generation of white missionaries, emboldened in part by the discovery of quinine as a malaria prophylaxis, gradually expanded their influence in the British West African territories, pushing Africans out of leadership positions within the church. With the expansion of colonialism following the European "Scramble for Africa," the British government also expanded its control over mission schools. However, education in the colonies only began to shift focus from religious instruction when it became clear that educated Africans were needed to assist in government and private offices as clerks, typists, support and occasionally professional staff.

The first university examinations in West Africa were the University of London Matriculation Examinations which began being offered in 1887. This scheme enabled individuals who could afford the fees to complete higher education courses by correspondence and earn certificates from the University of London. In this way, enterprising West Africans were able to get around the fact that there were no

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<sup>24</sup> There are interesting parallels to the emphasis on character in the literature on African-American education. For example, James D. Anderson's *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 35 highlights how education at Hampton Institute was designed to teach students the "dignity of labor" which would instill in them the "values" and "character" that would make them good teachers.

facilities for higher education in West Africa at that time.<sup>25</sup> Michael Omolewa describes how poor people were able to use this opportunity to acquire the certification that would advance their social status.

Many Nigerians from poor homes thus began to study for the London University Examinations to provide for themselves an opportunity to advance in political and social stature and material wealth. . . . And it was not uncommon to find teachers who had not benefited from secondary grammar school education working hard to pass the London University Examination.<sup>26</sup>

Omolewa ends his study at 1931, which he describes as a turning point in the University's relationship with West Africa since at that time, "[t]he Institute of Education of the London University was founded to embark, among other [goals], on educational experiments in Nigeria."<sup>27</sup> As will be demonstrated later, individuals from this institute played a key role in other educational developments in West Africa.

The first Civil Service Examination in West Africa was held in Sierra Leone in 1896. According to L.J. Lewis, only thirteen out of 110 candidates were successful in the examination. Although Lewis does not mention the consequences, it is likely that this poor performance sparked a debate similar to what had occurred in Scotland in relation to educational reforms.<sup>28</sup>

#### The Creation of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC)

Of early education in Nigeria, A. Babs Fafunwa writes,

The early grammar schools taught Latin and Greek and little or no science. Nigerian secondary school pupils

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<sup>25</sup> Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone had been in existence since 1827 but only a limited number of students could enroll. The significance of the matriculation examination was that it made higher education available to a much wider range of individuals.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Omolewa, "London University's Earliest Examinations in Nigeria, 1887-1931" *West African Journal of Education* 20.2 (June, 1976): p. 352.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>28</sup> See p. 9 above.

sat for the same school certificate examinations as English pupils. In 1956, however, the examination system was West Africanised and a West African Examination Council replaced the Oxford and Cambridge examination syndicates.<sup>29</sup>

While Fafunwa is correct regarding the early curriculum, he is incorrect about the WAEC beginning in 1956 or about the West African school curriculum being "West Africanized" at that early date.

Instead, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) opened its first headquarters office in the British colony of the Gold Coast in 1952. At that time, nationalist movements in West Africa were increasing in strength and popularity. Observers in Britain knew that self-government for West African citizens could not be withheld indefinitely. West African demands for independence began to be taken seriously after the end of World War II and the independence of India in 1948. Nationalists and colonial officials began to focus on the importance of education in a newly independent Africa with Africans being particularly vocal about the need for higher education. The British response was to send three commissions to different parts of Africa to study the educational needs of the colonies.<sup>30</sup> One such commission was headed in 1950 by Dr. George Barker Jefferey of the University of London's Institute of Education.<sup>31</sup> The report issued by the Jefferey Commission recommended the establishment of a "West

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<sup>29</sup> A. Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (Ibadan: NPS Educational Publishers, 1974), p. 190.

<sup>30</sup> The Asquith Commission studied higher education needs in all of the colonies, see Great Britain Commission on Higher Education in the Colonies *Report of the Commission for Higher Education in the Colonies* (London: HMSO, 1945). The Elliot Commission studied the specific higher education needs of West Africa, see Great Britain Commission on Higher Education in West Africa *Report of the Commission on Higher Education in West Africa* (London: HMSO, 1945). The Jefferey Commission's published report was *Conference on African Education African Education: A Study of Educational Policy and Practice in British Tropical Africa* (Oxford: The Nuffield Foundation and Great Britain Colonial Office, Oxford University Press, 1953).

<sup>31</sup> London's Institute of Education had a Colonial Department. Following independence, this department continued to publish research on Africa through the Department of Education in Tropical Areas.

African Examinations Council which would take over from British examining bodies the role of examining West African secondary school students.<sup>32</sup> The first examinations administered by the WAEC were for secondary school students and followed the model of examinations administered in Britain. The "meritocratic purpose" as described by Adrian Wooldridge and the social engineering purposes of examinations as described by John Roach in relation to Britain was not evident in West Africa. This is mainly because only limited groups of the population were receiving education in the first place. In each colony, the formation of elites and the opportunities to go to school focused particularly on the urban areas along the coast.

One of the grievances motivating West African nationalists was the limited opportunities for African advancement within the governments and commercial firms of the colonies. According to James S. Coleman, colonial officials responded by instituting an "Africanization" policy in which West Africans would gradually be given more positions within the civil service. The creation of new institutions like the WAEC was in line with this "Africanization" policy.<sup>33</sup>

Africanization of the administration did not necessarily signify Africanization of the curriculum. Criticisms leveled at schools in Britain held true for schools in West Africa as well. Too much emphasis was placed on a British "classics" type of curriculum and not enough attention was devoted to vocational and technical education. When reports began to suggest that the curriculum of schools should be more reflective of "African needs" and perhaps offer more technical training, members of the legislative assemblies of the Gold Coast and Nigeria voiced vehement opposition. Coleman points out that the colonial government had been trying to "Africanize" the curriculum since the 1930s. He notes at least three reasons in the case of Nigeria, why this had been opposed:

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<sup>32</sup> Conference on African Education. *African Education* pp. 30-31 and J. Deakin, "Changes in Examinations for West African Secondary Schools" *West African Journal of Education* 8. 2 (June, 1964): p.71.

<sup>33</sup>James S. Coleman, *Nigeria Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 154-155.

[First] they did not like the rural, tribal, vocational, vernacular, and moral instruction that the government intended to substitute. Secondly, parity of examination standards had become highly symbolical. As a group, these Nigerians aspired to European standards, and the English school certificate represented at least one area where nominal equality had been achieved. Finally, the possession of the certificate was a prerequisite not only for employment in Nigeria, but also for entry into universities abroad.<sup>34</sup>

Lord Hailey echoes Coleman's explanations suggesting that changes in the content of examinations were "delayed by the opposition of Africans to any step which appear[ed] to deprive them of gaining the hallmark which a pass in an external examination [was] held to convey."<sup>35</sup> Philip Foster citing Legislative Assembly debates from the Gold Coast argues that even the creation of the WAEC was opposed by some elites since "deviation from the colonial curriculum were regarded often with suspicion," and Africans feared that changing from British standards would prepare them only for second class citizenship.<sup>36</sup>

Does this mean that West African elites were too quick to embrace alien standards? In answering this question, it is important to keep in mind the extent to which education in West Africa fit into a "modernizing" framework. Early in the nationalist rhetoric came a concern with the need for Africa to "catch up" with the rest of the world. This attitude continued after independence and, at least in the initial stages, making the curriculum and examinations more relevant to the needs of West African students seemed incompatible with development and modernization goals. The reaction of West African intellectuals to efforts to change examinations prior to independence illustrates the extent to which elite West Africans believed that meeting British derived standards could be beneficial to them. Rather than

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>35</sup> Lord Hailey, *An African Survey: A Survey of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938) p. 1253.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Foster, *Education and Social Change in Ghana* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 185.

viewing educated West Africans as paranoid or too tied to the colonial system of which they were a product, Michael Omolewa demonstrates how a desire to maintain British standards was self-interested yet pragmatic given the social power that examinations had attained. He writes,

With the institution of British administration in Lagos in 1861, the possession of the certificate became to many Nigerians a source of strength and faith in their race. For this was a time when the myth of inferiority of the black man was widely spread. . . It became clear that success at the examinations brought considerable financial reward, social prestige and personal satisfaction to the Nigerian candidate. The examinations were therefore used to settle family rivalries, ethnic competitions and to achieve personal glory and dreams. Since the examinations were open to all Nigerians irrespective of age, religion, family and tribal origin, it was genuinely believed by Nigerians that they were acceptable and impartial means of making individual, family, and tribal assessments.<sup>37</sup>

What was true in 1861 remained true in the pre-independence era. In this respect, even though examinations had been used by those outside of Africa to "prove" African inferiority, West Africans attempted to use the exams to prove that they could compete with whites and with each other. It was only after these colonies gained independence that they started to take a more critical look at their educational policies and began "Africanizing" the examinations and syllabi.

#### Conclusion

The history of the West African Examinations Council provides an example of how individuals were able to use the standards set by British schools in order to succeed within both a colonial context and

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<sup>37</sup> Omolewa, "The First London University Examinations," p. 351.

later, a changing political order in which Britain's influence remained strong.

It is fair to say however, that whenever examinations were used in comparing racial *difference* the supposed objectivity of examinations was used against blacks. While the case of the WAEC provides an example of educated Africans using the idea of testing to their advantage, the history of mental testing in South Africa demonstrates another extreme. Saul Dubow highlights in *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* how educational tests and intelligence tests in particular were used to support racist political agendas. The poor performance of black children on intelligence tests was seen as proof of black genetic inferiority. At the same time, a similar showing by poor whites was interpreted as an "environmental" problem, which could be remedied by the proper government policies.<sup>38</sup> The South African case again raises the question of the use of idea of "objectivity" and provides the clearest demonstration of how efforts to measure human differences could be manipulated and used to favor pre-determined outcomes.

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<sup>38</sup> Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 209-232.

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